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ABSTRACT

The University of Massachusetts system launched a legislative "Report Card" project in an effort to pre-empt accountability mandates and improve institutional performance. In the process, the University developed legislative survey and focus group tools, empowered a system-wide University Institutional Research Group; and developed peer comparisons and other evaluative tools. The priority concerns regarding the university were surveyed with 93 state legislators. Meetings involving institutional researchers of the five university campuses identified types of data available, uniform definitions, and the following guidelines: use of peer comparisons or other comparative data, use of graphical display data with limited text, responsiveness to legislative interests expressed in the survey, and use of evaluative information that was feasible for the five campuses to obtain. Forces shaping the development of the Report Card are addressed, including the explaining vs. evaluating role of institutional researchers, using formative vs. summative evaluations, and system vs. campus concerns. The Report Card was released to controversy both on and off the campuses. Lessons learned in the process are discussed, including many with application to the larger subject of accountability reporting. (SW)

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EMBRACING THE INEVITABLE

Building a Legislative "Report Card" as an Institutional Priority

Presented at the 35th Annual Forum
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ABSTRACT

The rising tide of "accountability" has reached most institutions, often in the form of mandated performance measures. The University of Massachusetts system launched a legislative "Report Card" project in an effort to pre-empt accountability mandates and improve institutional performance. In the process the University developed legislative survey and focus group tools; empowered a system-wide University Institutional Research Group; and developed peer comparisons and other evaluative tools. The Report Card was released to controversy both on and off the campuses; the authors discuss lessons learned in the process, including many with application to the larger subject of accountability reporting.

INTRODUCTION

The rising tide of interest in "accountability" has reached most institutions in one form or another, but with varying force and effect: some institutions feel they have been inundated by legislative reporting mandates — some directly tied to resource allocation — while others are only now getting their feet wet. There is growing consensus, however, that no institution receiving public funds can hold back the waters indefinitely.

Accountability demands will not and should not go away. The decisions of those who pay for and enjoy the benefits of higher education must be informed by the best insights we can offer. As a state legislative oversight committee concluded in a 1992 study of faculty workload at a major public university:

> The Committee recognizes that measuring outputs and performance is difficult in many state agencies. However, the Committee is surprised that an institution of public higher education, which is inherently predisposed toward the transfer of knowledge, is seemingly unable to communicate its activities to the wider community.

THE GENESIS OF THE UMASS "REPORT CARD"

In the face of these trends University of Massachusetts President Michael K. Hooker sought to "get ahead of the curve" and demonstrate that a public university could be accountable even without an external mandate. He conceived of the UMass Report Card as a major annual accountability report for the State Legislature and the public at large, to be designed and produced by the University itself.

Michael Hooker took office in September of 1992 as the first permanent president since a legislative reorganization that added two campuses to the existing three-campus University of Massachusetts system. The reorganization devolved substantial governing authority from the state-wide Board of Regents (now the Higher Education Coordinating Council) to the UMass Board of Trustees.

President Hooker saw the Report Card as having three principal purposes. First, the Report Card was to increase the credibility of the University and of the information it provides to state policy makers. Second, Hooker wanted to use the Report Card as a tool to promote goal-setting and improvement on the part of the University's campuses. Finally, since the Report Card was to be released annually, he hoped that it would demonstrate progress and improvement for the whole University over time. The Report Card project was initiated in August 1993 and the first edition was released in November 1994.

DEVELOPMENT

Early in the development of the Report Card, President's Office staff involved in the project met with representatives of Coopers & Lybrand's Higher Education Consulting Services to seek advice on shaping the project (Coopers & Lybrand provided this service as part of its auditing contract with the University). From that meeting, President's Office staff developed a brief survey of members of the Legislature, sent out on Coopers and Lybrand letterhead, intended to provide a sense of legislators' highest priorities for UMass. A total of 92 responses to the survey were received, representing an overall response rate of 43 percent.

Almost all the areas of University activity referenced in the survey were seen as important by legislators. However, differences emerged when respondents were asked to identify their top three priorities for the University:

- Seventy-seven (77) percent of those surveyed said accessibility/affordability should be one of the system's top three priorities, more than any other single item in the survey. Sixty-nine (69) percent rated the quality of teaching a top priority for the system. The level of consensus evident around the importance of access and teaching placed these two priorities in a class by themselves; all other items in the survey garnered substantially weaker support.

- Post-graduate success was rated a top priority by 28 percent of respondents, and retaining/graduating students was so rated by 17 percent (although both are arguably components of the quality of teaching, they were offered in the survey separately).

- One quarter of those surveyed indicated that efficient use of resources should be one of the University's top three priorities, and a quarter chose economic development and impact.

- The level of consensus fell off rapidly after this point. Only 15 percent of respondents felt that quality of research & scholarship and public service to the Commonwealth should be top priorities. Similarly, only 9 percent selected diversity of students, faculty and staff. However, all of these had been and continue to be clear internal priorities of the UMass system.

Concurrent with the legislative survey, the Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs in the President's Office began meeting regularly with the institutional research directors and other staff of the five UMass campuses to discuss the kinds of data that might be available and to develop uniform definitions. These individuals had already worked together on a number of projects, and had formed what is now the UMass Institutional Research Group (UIRG). As the group worked from a long list of possible reporting items to select the data that would ultimately be used, several guiding principles emerged:

- **Use of peer comparisons or other comparative data.** The President had articulated a desire to include peer comparisons wherever possible. To do this, UIRG relied on previously established peer groups for each campus consisting of eight institutions of roughly similar mission, size, and program mix. These peer groups had been chosen two years earlier, with the assistance of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), for a set of financial comparisons (some of which were also included in the Report Card). While it would probably have made sense to modify the peer groups for the expanded purpose of the Report Card, time did not permit such a process.

- **Graphical display of data with limited text.** The UIRG decided that the body of the Report Card should consist of quantitative data presented in charts, graphs, and pictures, with limited amounts of narrative. As a general principle, it was felt that the Report Card should be attractive and easily accessible to its intended audience. It was also understood that state-level policy makers would be able to devote only limited time and attention to the Report Card. The University therefore hired a graphic design firm to assist with the final production and layout.

- **Responsiveness to legislative interests as revealed in the survey.** The Report Card was organized into four sections that roughly correlated to issues highlighted by the legislative survey: Opportunity (access/affordability); Teaching; Public Service, Economic Development, and Research; and Resources (efficiency).

- **Feasibility.** While many kinds of evaluative information could have been (and were) imagined, the UIRG was constrained by the limits of available information, or the limits of generating comparable information by all the campuses, especially under a tight timetable.

Once a first draft had been assembled, the President's Office sponsored several small focus group meetings at which reactions of legislators and legislative staff were solicited. The meetings largely affirmed the value of the project and the relevance of the specific data we included. Some concrete suggestions for additional data were made and incorporated into the final report.

FORCES SHAPING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REPORT CARD

The development and implementation of the Report Card project were shaped by a number of forces at work in the University of Massachusetts system and in higher education generally. At each critical juncture, choices were presented that required the institutional research staff to acknowledge and account for these forces. In many cases demands and interests influencing the project were in competition or even conflict, and the IR staff was required to balance these competing interests in order to make it possible for the project to continue.

Each set of competing interests introduced its own tension into the process. In fact, in many ways the project was defined by these tensions, and by the strategies employed by the institutional research staff to deal with them. While many forces interacted as the project unfolded, three areas of clear and persistent tension had a powerful impact on the final form and content of the Report Card.

Explaining vs. Evaluating

The institutional research craft frequently places its practitioners in the position of attempting two jobs at once. On the one hand, institutional research staff often stand at the "front door" of an institution, describing and explaining the institution's activities to many

audiences. Often, these audiences have little if any familiarity with the institution or even higher education, and the descriptive role of the institutional research professional becomes both challenging and important to an institution's success.

An example of this descriptive, or explanatory, role can be seen in the growing interest in faculty workload. Legislators, trustees and others often demonstrate a keen interest in the general subject, but may not be well-versed in the complexities of the issue. This is especially true with respect to research universities, where the multiplicity of and variation among faculty roles is often poorly understood even on the campus itself. Before one can intelligently assess faculty workload it is necessary to understand it. With faculty roles ranging from clinical medical faculty who may not generate a single student credit hour to part-time instructors hired on a piece-work basis to staff lower-division or general education courses, the appropriate workload consistent with institutional policies and expectations is not always obvious to an outside observer. In such a case, it is often the institutional research professional who must set the context by making reference to relevant policies, arraying information in ways that respect institutional expectations, and placing institutional practice within the framework of other, similar institutions.

On the other hand, institutional research staff are important — and often the sole — evaluators of institutional practice. To employ the same example, it is often the institutional research office that collects, reports and interprets faculty workload data. Depending on institutional culture and tradition, the institutional research office may make intra- or inter-campus comparisons, place institutional data in the context of national norms (such as the distribution of effort reported from the National Survey of Post-Secondary Faculty [NSOPF]), or develop prescriptive policy papers and analyses.

These roles are not necessarily in conflict. One can explain without evaluating, and vice versa, with the choice or emphasis of roles often depending upon the audience being addressed. With external audiences the explanatory role was once the most common, while the evaluative role was most meaningful inside the institution. This separation of roles tended to keep them out of conflict.

Increasingly, however, as higher education has come under greater and greater external scrutiny, the need to perform both roles simultaneously has grown, as well. Where once it was accepted that evaluation was principally the province of institutional or system administrators, we now see much greater interest in exploring and even shaping evaluation on the part of trustees, legislators and others. Evaluative data are often placed directly into the hands of external audiences — sometimes by legislative mandate — and the ability of institutions to regulate the uses to which such data are put has substantially been diminished. Meanwhile, the explanatory role has not disappeared; if anything, it has become more important as evaluative data travels further afield. The tension is clearly evident in the Report Card. What began as a series of relatively straightforward, largely graphic representations of data rapidly accumulated notes, caveats and, finally, "President's Comments" that sought to explain the meaning of the measures.

But performing the explanatory and evaluative roles simultaneously can be quite difficult. The campus community frequently wants the institutional research professional to "explain away" analyses that raise questions or inconsistencies. From inside the institution, the institutional research professional's explanatory role can be seen as critical in deflecting unwelcome interest or criticism from the outside. But external constituencies tend to have little patience for the explanatory role, seeing it for what it sometimes is: the role of the institutional apologist who is at best unresponsive and at worst deceptive. From the outside, the value of the institutional research professional lies in his or her role as a dispassionate evaluator, a

speaker of truths that others will not utter. When audiences of both kinds — internal and external — are involved, the conflict between expectations can become impossible.

The UMass Report Card project placed the institutional research staff from the campuses into the midst of this conflict. On the one hand, they were expected to manage the process of creating an accountability tool with a decidedly "outside" orientation, and to stress the evaluative role. The University President made it clear that he wanted the Report Card to have high credibility among its intended audience of legislators, officials in the executive branch, and others. On the other hand, aside from the Assistant Vice President who coordinated the project, all those working on the project were staff members from the five UMass campuses. They felt varying degrees of pressure to justify, qualify, and buffer the impact of the evaluative data. To their home campuses, the explanatory role was most important.

Formative vs. Summative

The "evaluative" role of the institutional research professional involves its own tension, between the formative and summative dimensions of the enterprise. The former focuses on improvements in practice, the kind of "institution-building" that any adaptive organization must engage in. The focus is on understanding how the institution accomplishes its work, not on judging its value. institutional research professionals also engage in summative evaluation, in which the goal is to assess the performance of the institution so as to draw conclusions of one kind or another. The summative side of institutional research work is frequently associated with resource allocation processes, when a decision must be made regarding continued investment in programs.

As external scrutiny of colleges and universities has increased, so too has the emphasis placed on summative evaluation. With rare exception, legislators and others external to the

campus are interested in making judgments about institutions, not in gaining insights into institutional practice. In part this summative emphasis is rooted in a healthy respect for differing roles: excessive interest in formative evaluation on the part of legislators or state-wide boards, for example, could be a sign of inappropriate "micro-management" on the part of policy makers. More important, however, is the simple fact that the growing competition for public funds demands more — and more precise — funding decisions. The increasing difficulty of these decisions creates a market for information to support them. Almost by definition, information that supports decision-making tends to emerge from summative, rather than formative, evaluation.

The tension between formative and summative evaluation was manifest in the UMass Report Card project. A certain amount of anxiety naturally accompanies the prospect of one's organization being judged from the outside. The anxiety of institutional research professionals, however, tends to be heightened by virtue of their understanding of the weakness of the data available for summative judgments. The kind of information available to most institutions is simply not up to the task of supporting fine judgments, and yet a project like the Report Card seems to invite such judgments. The campus institutional research professionals found themselves struggling with the strong desire of the University President to "grade" the institution.

System vs. Campus

Institutional Research professionals can also be subject to a related but distinct set of tensions involving the relationships between a University system administration and the campuses within the system. Even in the most congenial and well-managed university system differences exist between the aspirations and interests of the campuses and the central administration. These differences can be rooted in many factors: interinstitutional competition,

resource allocation and control, and differing perceptions of institutional traditions and directions, to name but a few.

Differences of this kind are not inherently damaging, and many would argue that they are to be anticipated and respected in a vibrant university system. Responsibility for dealing with the resulting tension, however, usually resides with the campus CEOs and the system administrator and central staff. Rarely is the "middle management" of an institution asked to engage in the kind of diplomacy that successful campus-system relationships rely on.

The UMass Report Card project, however, made diplomats-without-portfolio of each of the participating institutional research staff members. Each was asked, in effect, to represent the interests of both his or her campus and the University system. Since the fundamental premises of the Report Card project originated in the system office, with relatively little interaction with the campuses, this form of diplomacy proved to be quite difficult.

As a relatively new system, the University of Massachusetts was still working through a number of campus-system and campus-campus issues when the Report Card project was initiated. One set of issues related to the diverse nature and traditions of the UMass campuses.

Another set of issues centered on the production and analysis of institutional data. Accompanying the reorganization of the University were new demands for information from the President's Office and trustees. However, there was no institutional research function and few, if any, centralized reporting capabilities. The President's Office assumed a coordinating role and representatives from each of the campuses, some institutional research professionals and others new to the field, worked together to develop reporting systems for the University. When the Report Card project began, the institutional research function had been assumed by the assistant vice president for academic affairs, who served as coordinator of the institutional

research group. The capacities within the system differed greatly from campus to campus. Two of the campuses had established institutional research offices with at least three professional and support staff members and fairly sophisticated reporting capabilities. At the other extreme, one campus had no institutional research staff nor established reporting systems and had no choice but to estimate if the data were not available. To this day, the campuses are struggling to develop common data definitions.

The difficulty of merging campus and system perspectives is illustrated in the section of the Report Card dealing with undergraduate education. Two graphs are displayed; one was a distribution of course sections shown by type of instructor, and the other was a distribution of course sections by section size. In operationalizing the definition of a "course section," the UIRG agreed that independent study and other types of individualized instructional arrangements would not be included. It soon became evident, however, that only one campus could identify such sections through its course-numbering system. In the end, this type of instruction was approximated by defining a "course section" as a section enrolling three or more students.

The Report Card was designed to report on the University system and to demonstrate the impact of the University on the state. This limited the campuses' ability to showcase their programs or highlight successes in specific areas. The five campuses, aside from being universities, differ in size, mission and program mix. However, from the system perspective it was sometimes preferable to report data in the aggregate. For example, one chart focused on the diversity of students attending UMass. What was not said was that the urban campus had a disproportionately large number of students of color, and strongly affected the profile for the system. Similarly, another chart on doctoral degree production compared the number of degrees awarded in the system to those awarded by the state's private institutions. What was not said

was that the majority of doctorates were awarded by the research campus in the system. Clearly, the data would have been reported differently if the perspective were the campuses.

Data presentation varied depending on the topic and availability of data. Some data were aggregated and presented at the system level; some were presented individually for the four campuses, some were presented for only one campus and finally, some compared the UMass campuses to a group of peer institutions. The peer groups had been selected three years earlier for a set of financial comparisons, specifically sources of revenue and spending per student. The campuses, to varying degrees, were uncomfortable with using the same peer group for non-financial comparisons; however, the schedule for the Report Card did not allow time for identifying a different set of peers.

RELEASE AND AFTERMATH

The release of the Report Card received widespread attention in the state's print media. The report was characterized as "candid" and "eye-opening" by the Boston press. Legislators gave the University high marks for producing the report, although it is not obvious that many of them took the time to absorb its contents despite the efforts to make it easy to digest.

However, reaction to the Report Card proper is difficult to assess because most of the press attention focused on a remark the President made in response to a *Boston Globe* reporter's question on the day it was released. The reporter asked, "if this is a report card, what overall grade would you give the University?" After a moment's hesitation, the President replied, "C-plus." The front-page *Globe* headline the next day read: "UMass receives average grade from its chief."

Many UMass faculty, staff, and students were outraged by this remark, and months later, despite an explanation and apology from the president circulated to all faculty, the remark continues to rankle. There is also evidence of some disturbing unintended consequences, such as reluctance on the part of prospective students, parents, donors, or business associates of the University to invest their money and confidence in a "C+" institution. At the same time, faculty and staff who have actually read the Report Card itself are considerably less offended by its contents than by the grade.

One gratifying outcome of the release of the Report Card is that it served as the basis of a lively, candid, and stimulating discussion among the Board of Trustees, the President, and the five campus Chancellors. The discussion focused on the policy implications of the information presented and the tradeoffs and judgments involved in seeking improvement in specific areas. Staff who were present at this discussion felt it was one of the best Trustee meetings they had ever attended.

One thing the publication of the Report Card did *not* do is pre-empt the demand for greater and greater amounts of similar "accountability" data from state policy makers. Just two months after the Report Card was released, the state's Secretary of Administration and Finance sent a letter to the chair of the UMass Board of Trustees asking the University to submit an annual report with "performance benchmarks" on approximately 35 indicators, many of which were used in the Report Card. Several months after that, the House passed a budget including a long list of "Program Performance Measures" to be submitted each semester. Some were clearly taken directly from the Report Card; others from the Secretary's letter; and others were contributed by the Ways & Means Committee's higher education budget analyst. And the Higher Education Coordinating Council appointed a Task Force on Higher Education Goals and Objectives, Performance Measures and Accountability which is developing a system-wide template for accountability reporting.

Planning has already begun for the next version of the Report Card, which is to be released in March 1996 (on the theory that a spring release would allow inclusion of more recent data and have greater impact during the annual state budget debate). In the meantime, the President asked each campus to stipulate one, three, and five-year targets for improvement in five areas highlighted in the Report Card: SAT scores of entering freshmen, retention rates, graduation rates, volume of sponsored research, and dollars raised through fund raising. These targets are being monitored by the Board of Trustees.

LESSONS LEARNED

Having completed the first round of the Report card project, the authors have formulated some tentative observations, many of which have application to the broader subject of accountability reporting. While the development of the Report Card involved staff from the system office and all five UMass campuses, it is important to note that these observations reflect the judgments of the authors only.

1. It is important to recognize the tensions that naturally occur in the context of accountability reporting, and to set realistic expectations for the role institutional research professionals play. Regardless of the structure of the project, campus-based institutional research officers cannot fully step out of their campus roles and institutional research professionals in general will see the need to balance evaluation with explanation and to resist over-emphasis on summative evaluation.

2. In a multi-campus system setting, the success of a project of this kind depends critically on the existence of strong working relationships among campus and system institutional research professionals. Each member of the team needs to understand the traditions and

politics of the other campuses and of the system itself. Given the enormous tensions at work in a project of this kind, it is not realistic to expect to build good working relationships where there is no existing foundation. UMass was fortunate in that such relationships had been forged from the first days of the five-campus system.

3. It is important to recognize that accountability projects are essentially political, not technical, exercises. Despite the best laid plans of institutional research professionals (and institutional leaders) it is impossible to predict how the evidence will be read or what will capture the headlines. The handling of the release of a document like the Report Card is as or more important than the report itself.

4. Be responsive to legislative concerns. The survey of members of the Legislature and the focus groups seeking legislative reaction were important in building support for the Report Card, even if the final product was not closely examined.

5. Use peer comparisons or other comparative data. To provide a context for evaluating performance, the UMass Report Card included peer comparisons wherever possible. The investment of time and effort necessary to develop reliable peer data is substantial, but its presence adds a dimension to accountability reporting that cannot be achieved in any other way.

6. Be honest. The indicators chosen for the Report Card revealed both good and bad news. This imparted a sense of balance that contributed to the credibility of the project.

7. Accept the reality that higher education continues to lack meaningful quantifiable measures for many important aspects of its mission, notably teaching and learning and public service.

This often requires the use of "proxies" of dubious value (such as the use of GRE scores of graduating seniors as a measure of "the quality of instruction").

8. Building and maintaining systems for institutional accountability like the Report Card are immensely labor- and time-intensive activities. Very little "routine" work can be accomplished at the same time, especially in the developmental stages.

9. Think about how an accountability project will be perceived from the outside. If it is billed as a "report card," the expectations that a "grade" will result will be almost overwhelming. If it is intended to be more formative or explanatory, that message should be conveyed in the style and form of the document.

10. Recognize that, at least in today's environment, one cannot "pre-empt" external interest in accountability. The interest is latent, and institutional efforts can actually give this interest form and substance. There is some evidence that the UMass Report Card actually stimulated interest in accountability data. Nonetheless, by "going first" it may be possible for an institution to set productive terms for the debate and avoid the problems that arise when one is reacting to unforeseen outside interest.

11. Remember that accountability projects may serve other purposes. The UMass Report Card, for example, resulted in a number of benchmarks that will be useful for institutional purposes. The process of developing consistent data definitions within the new University of Massachusetts system was clearly accelerated by the demands of the Report Card project. And, by entering the fray, one learns what works and what does not. This can be valuable knowledge given the likelihood that higher education is entering a period of prolonged and intense scrutiny.